



King, E. (2020). Autographic Selfies: Digital Comics, Social Media and Networked Photography. In J. Scorer (Ed.), *Comics Beyond the Page in Latin America* (pp. 136-157). UCL Press.
https://www.uclpress.co.uk/collections/ro_homepage_products/products/130728

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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7

Autographic selfies: Digital comics, social media and networked photography

Edward King

In a post-internet age, in which access to online information is increasingly controlled by a small number of gatekeepers, digital comics have developed in close connection with social media platforms. After years of debate as to what digital comics actually are – whether an extension of print comics or an entirely distinct medium (see Wilde 2015) – there has been little discussion of the role played by social media in the production of comics both constructed with digital technologies and consumed through digital interfaces. This, despite the fact that sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Tumblr have become the primary means by which comics find their readers, whether it be through social media campaign battles between industrial giants Marvel and DC (see Brundige 2015), or their use by emerging independent artists to develop a style in dialogue with readers (see, for example, [Carolina González Alvarado's](#) chapter in this volume). Rather than the potential of what Scott McCloud termed the ‘infinite canvas’ (2000, 200–42) (in which the computer monitor is converted into a ‘window’ onto an infinitely vast comic-book page) or the ability to divide the page into dynamic individual panels that the reader must click through (an approach performed by French cartoonist Yves ‘Balak’ Bigerel in his 2009 comic-manifesto ‘About Digital Comics’), it is the interface provided by the social media giants that is proving the most influential on contemporary comic-book production. While the affordances and constraints of sites such as Instagram contain elements

of both of these approaches, depending on whether you view a profile on one potentially endless scroll or as individual images that you click through one at a time, the use of social media also foregrounds an aspect of digital comics less often invoked to describe them as either a distinct medium or an organic development of print comics: their status as networked objects.

This confluence of digital comics and the networked logic of social media has been nowhere more in evidence than in Brazil. In part, this is due to the dominant role of social media sites in the country. Following a period of economic growth, coupled with government-led digital dissemination initiatives (see Oram 2016), Brazil experienced an unusually abrupt social media uptake during the mid-2000s to become the home of the second-most active population on social media in the world after the US. The spread of information and formation of opinion made possible by social media played a key role in the ensuing social and political crisis that, at the time of writing, continues to grip the country. Citizen journalist organisations such as *Mídia Ninja* turned their preferred platforms (Instagram and Facebook) into the prime sources of information during the anti-government protests of 2013 as well as the subsequent state-driven repression. During these same events, both ends of the political spectrum harnessed the viral spread of internet memes to mobilise and manipulate public opinion while, following the decree of Federal Law No. 12.034, official political candidates standing for election attempted to secure votes through social media sites that held the promise of more direct connections to voters than afforded by the broadcast media of radio and TV (see Arnaudo 2017). In many ways, the instrumental role of social media websites in the 2014 presidential elections in Brazil provided a precedent and model for the much more heavily publicised manipulation of user information during the US elections of 2016. Social media in Brazil has become the stage on which individuals position themselves in relation to the latest developments and declare political affiliations and oppositions. It is where social divisions are performed, reaffirmed, and sometimes contested.

The booming domestic comic-book industry in Brazil has also harnessed this abrupt social media uptake. This encounter has taken a number of forms, whether it be the use of online platforms by individual practitioners for crowdfunding campaigns, publicity pushes by established corporations such as *Maurício de Sousa Produções*, or the diffusion of satirical cartoons, or ‘*tiras*’, in online commentary on political debates (such as the work of *Laerte* or *Angeli*). One of the most

striking trends in this convergence of social media and digital comics has been the focus on the individual: the use of the form for creative and self-reflexive re-imaginings of the self. In many ways, this is a tendency specific neither to the Brazilian context nor to the digital turn in comic-book cultures. In her chapter in this volume, Carla Sagástegui Heredia discusses the strategies of self-representation carried out by Peruvian comics artists, including Juan Acevedo and David Galliquio. Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey, meanwhile, identify autobiography as one of the dominant narrative modes behind the rise of the long-form genre sometimes, though never without caveats, referred to as the graphic novel. Certainly, 'graphic memoirs', such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, first published between 1980 and 1991, and later released as *The Complete Maus* (1996), and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006), have garnered the most sustained critical attention among the various comic-book forms and tendencies. In her study of Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004) and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (2003) and *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* (2004), Gillian Whitlock (2006) coins the term 'autographics' to describe the formal design strategies and narrative techniques that set graphic memoirs apart from autobiographic narratives in other media. The first of these specificities is the critical distance introduced by what Marianne Hirsch (2004) described as the 'biocularity' of the form, the demands on the reader made by the 'distinctive verbal-visual conjunctions that occur in comics' (Whitlock 2006, 966). The second specificity mentioned by Whitlock is the idea, developed from McCloud's landmark study *Understanding Comics* (1993), that 'iconic drawings of the human face are particularly powerful in promoting identification between reader/viewer and image' (Whitlock 2006, 976), which means that graphic memoirs possess an ability to elicit a higher degree of empathy than film and prose.

However, whereas the dominant points of reference for Spiegelman, Bechdel and Satrapi's long-form memoirs are cinematic and literary (explicitly so in Bechdel's highly intertextual work), the mode of narrativising or performing the self that provides the main point of reference for digital comics is that which takes place through online social networks. Rather than autobiography, these tend to consist of snapshots of the self, fragments of textual-visual information that can fit on the screen of a mobile phone one piece at a time, even if these pieces are part of a longer series bound together by a common aesthetic, characters or narrative point of view. Wes Nunes's 'Manifesto dos Quadrinhos', for instance, is

a memoir that first appeared on Tumblr in four-panel sections and was subsequently published in print. Deborah Salles's series 'Quadrinista de Ocasião' was published through the online magazine *medium.com* in single pages, excerpts of which – mainly individual panels – were also posted on her Instagram account. At the level of theme, a recurrent focus has been the modes of presenting the self to others, the forms of subjectivity and inter-subjectivity, specific to the digital age. Artists such as Nunes and Salles reflect a number of tendencies informing the political crisis that provides the backdrop to their work. They register the shifting forms of relating the self to wider national, regional and civic communities as well as the political causes and identity categories that have been shaped by the crisis. The work of Wes Nunes, the more explicitly political of the two artists, confronts readers with the often-violent reality of growing up as gay or transsexual and black in an authoritarian society such as Brazil's. Nunes shows how digital communications both serve to reinforce the prejudices that legitimise violence against LGBTQ+ communities and offer alternative avenues for the expression of self and the construction of alternative modes of belonging or connection. More generally, by developing what Carolina González Alvarado describes as the reader's 'multimodal competence' (see her chapter in this volume), 'autographic' digital comics such as these provide a space of reflection on the ways in which social media platforms articulate individual subjectivities with the networks of technologies, images and discourses that bind these subjectivities together.

One of the dominant ways in which recent narrativisations of the self through online digital comics have reflected on the social affordances of networked communications technology is through a focus on the centrality of the photographic image to social media. A particular focus has been the role of what Edgar Gómez Cruz and Eric Meyer (2012) describe as 'networked' photography produced by the conjunction between camera phones and social media in both the ongoing processes of constructing the self and articulating connections between bodies, images and technologies. Gómez Cruz and Meyer argue that the conditions of production, storage and distribution enabled by camera phones and social media sites has brought with it a new stage in the history of the medium in which photography should be understood not as a mode of representation or a particular media technology but as a 'socio-technical network' (Gómez Cruz and Meyer 2012, 2). The photographic object is 'nothing but the materialization of a series of assemblages' (*ibid.*), interlacing ideological discourses

concerning what merits visibility, technologies that inscribe and reproduce these ideologies, and bodies that are conditioned by but also resist them. Digital comics in Brazil have engaged with networked photography in a manner that has been both ‘explicit’ and ‘implicit’, to borrow a distinction made by Baetens in his work on intermediality in photo novels (Baetens 2017, 3). That is to say, on the one hand, digital comics have referenced networked photography explicitly at a thematic level while maintaining the purity of the recognised medium they are working within. A good example of this is Salles’ ‘Quadrinhista de Ocasão’, a comic that was hand-drawn and only subsequently uploaded onto a digital platform, but which thematises the centrality of digital photography to the artist’s life. Other comics that do not thematise networked photography nevertheless mobilise its affordances in an implicit way. The artist Lovelove6, whose work centres on themes of gender and sexuality, uploads photographs of her work to the Instagram account @odiozinho. The networked interactions enabled by the platform are the element in which her work exists without being an explicit focus of the comics themselves.

The focus of this chapter is a Brazil-based comics artist whose work blurs the distinction between ‘explicit’ and ‘implicit’ treatment of networked photography through a prolonged engagement with the genre of photographic self-representation known as the selfie. Éff is a design student from São Cristóvão in the state of Sergipe in the North East of Brazil who has been producing a series of comics and distributing them through Instagram, Twitter and Tumbler since 2015. His Instagram account (eff.eff.eff) is subtitled in a way that draws attention to its interplay between one-page autobiographical comics, painted self-portraits and selfie photographs: ‘Éff Alguém que registra a vida em quadrinhos, pinturas e uma ou outra cara sem muita expressão nas fotos [Éff somebody who records his life in comics, paintings and the occasional expressionless face in photographs]’. The highly curated Instagram stream combines the implicit engagement with networked photography through the use of the image-sharing site as an interface with readers, with an explicit thematisation of the modes of selfhood and intersubjectivity produced in their mediation by social media photography. The comics contain a striking number of cartoon drawings of smart phone screens, a feature that is indicative of the central role they play in the artist’s emotional life. In some ways, the account can be seen as a narrative of the artist’s ongoing love affair with his mobile phone. A four-panel comic posted on Instagram on 21 April 2018 narrates the

artist's struggle to decide how frequently to text somebody he is dating (see Figure 7.1).



Figure 7.1 A comic exploring Éff's affective relationship with his mobile phone, posted on Instagram on 21 April 2018. © Fernando Caldas (Éff)

The first panel appears beneath a text box written in the first person: 'Se mando mensagem sempre me sinto sufocando a pessoa [If I send a message I always feel like I'm suffocating the person]'. The image shows an anthropomorphised mobile phone, whose eyes are bulging under the suffocating grip being exerted by a hand the reader assumes belongs to the artist. The mobile phone here is made to stand in metonymically for the social relations it enables. The comic ends by concluding that what is needed is a middle way between bombarding

somebody with messages and leaving them alone. The final panel shows the artist peacefully asleep in his bed still holding a phone, which is displaying a similar level of contentment to its owner. The one-page comic introduces the thematic focus that runs through the work as a whole: the affective assemblages between bodies, images and networked technologies, and the potential critical role of autographic comics in relation to these assemblages.

In what remains of this chapter, I will examine the encounter between the digital comic form and social media photography in the work of Éff. I use the term 'autographic selfies' to describe the meeting point, represented in his work, between the graphic memoir genre and the aesthetic regime of the selfie. The selfie has proved to be a particularly fruitful focus for the analysis of the socio-technical assemblages enabled by networked photography. Often critically or dismissively described in the popular press as being symptomatic of a narcissistic culture, selfies have been attracting increasingly sophisticated critical attention for the light they shed on the complex forms of intersubjectivity of the digital age. Rather than reflective of the technology-driven atomisation of communities, they can be more productively viewed as socio-technological assemblages. I will start by placing Éff's use of the selfie in a longer history of interconnections between the comics medium and photography, before analysing the work itself through a focus on two themes: the staging of intimacy and the changing modalities of touch. Through an in-depth analysis of this individual body of work, I will explore the critical role the form of digital comics can perform in relation to the changing modes of selfhood and intersubjectivity bound up with social media. While, unlike Nunes, Éff's work is not political in an explicit sense, I will end by considering the light it sheds on the political implications of the vernacular hybrid visualities of the digital age.

Scholarly discussion of the use of photographic media in comic books has centred on questions of authenticity and truth. This has been most clearly the case in works of graphic journalism (or graphic reportage) that employ combinations of photographic and drawn images. In her comparative study of Joe Sacco's *The Fixer: A Story from Sarajevo* (2014) and *The Photographer: Into War-Torn Afghanistan with Doctors Without Borders* (first published in French between 2003 and 2006), Katalin Orbán focuses on the tension, central to both works, between the use of photographic images as 'the twentieth century's primary medium of documentary evidence' and the emphasis of first-person reportage on 'the presence, perspective and representational choices of the person(s)

representing' without any 'assumption of unmediated reality' (Orbán 2015, 124). In a digital technological context in which photographic images are increasingly recognised as being subject to manipulation (and even if this was always the case even with 'analogue'), photographs, Orbán points out, 'have arguably come closer to being "drawn"' (Orbán 2015, 125). In other words, there should be nothing jarring about the presence of photographic images in graphic narrative since both are equally mediated. And yet, the form of graphic reportage is testament to a 'disjunction or lag' between our 'knowledge' of the manipulability of photography and our cultural 'response' to this knowledge. Even if the emplacement of photographs within graphic narrative draws attention to their subjective nature (an argument also made by Roy Cook, 2012), they still carry with them a lingering sense of a privileged connection to the real.¹ This association has also become central in works of graphic memoir that either reproduce photographic images or remediate them through drawing. In an analysis of the work of Swedish and Finnish graphic memoirists, Nina Ernst argues that 'intrusions' of photographic images in their 'storyworlds' function both as 'narrative strategies for forming authenticity' and 'to convey a sense of process in the creation of identity' (2015, 65–6). As I will go on to demonstrate, these associations have been self-reflexively problematised and complexified in a number of texts that position themselves within the genre of graphic memoir.

These tensions between graphic narrative and photographic media have been particularly pronounced in Latin American comic-book production. Debates surrounding memories of state-sponsored violence in the region have provided a particularly fertile ground for this encounter between photography and comics. In Argentina, this meeting point was marked by the publication of *Historietas por la identidad* (Gociol 2015), the result of a collaborative project between the Mariano Morelo National Library and the Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo, a human rights organisation whose aim is to track down the children stolen or illegally adopted during the Argentine dictatorship of 1976–83. The aim of the book, which is based on work used in a travelling exhibit, is to employ the comics medium as an instrument in this search. In all of the short narratives – each produced by a different artist and focusing on the search carried out by a different family or families – photographs occupy a central position. The stories evidence the tension that Ernst ascribes to the role played by photography in graphic memoir: namely between authenticity and process. The story produced by Andy Riva (2015), on behalf of the families of Mónica Eleonora Delgado and Eduardo Benito

Francisco Corvalán, who were both kidnapped and killed by military police in July 1976, is exemplary in this regard. The two-page comic takes the form of a series of strips of photographic negatives. Each frame in the script is turned into a panel in the unfolding narrative, which narrates the birth of Mónica and Eduardo's children Mariana and Gabriel in 1973 and 1964 respectively (before the kidnapping) and, over a sun-bleached frame of an eye closing, tells the reader that Mónica was three months pregnant at the time of her 'disappearance'. The narrative ends with a plea to the reader: 'Tal vez vos sepas dónde está [Perhaps you know where he/she is]' (Riva 2015, 9). The comic brings to life the reason why the connection between photography and documentary truth 'lingers' in a particularly powerful way in social contexts coming to terms with past conflict. The reader learns in a postscript written by Gabriel that the photographs used in the comic were taken by the couple shortly before the kidnapping and were only revealed in 2000 when the roll of film was discovered by a friend. So, the photographs perform two main functions. On the one hand, they stand in for the memories of the children Mariana and Gabriel and draw attention to the formative role of media in the active construction of memory (a process documented by Marianne Hirsch in her account of the 'post-memories' of the children of Holocaust victims). On the other hand, they fulfil the more pragmatic function of displaying the faces of the two children for a reader to identify family resemblances between them and their missing sibling.

The post-dictatorship context has also been the focus of a number of comics in Brazil, especially after the establishment of the truth commission in 2011. One of the most interesting comic-book approaches to the subject is *Ditadura no ar* (2016), scripted by Raphael Fernandes with art from Abel (Rafael Vasconcellos), which was first published online in 2011 before appearing in print. The comic focuses on a freelance photographer searching for his girlfriend who has been kidnapped by the military regime. Although not as conceptually complex as the *Historietas por la identidad* collection, the inter-medial inclusion of photographs in the comic book serves to question the epistemological discourses surrounding photography, especially in the context of a repressive regime, while interrogating the role of media in the constitution of individual identity in relation to collective modes of belonging.² In both *Historietas por la identidad* and *Ditadura no ar*, identity is presented as a process and a search, at the centre of which is an absence. Individual identity is constituted through the network of forces, discourses and technologies that determine it.

Recent scholars writing about the role of photography in graphic memoirs have shifted the focus of debate from the documentary function of photographic images in establishing truth and authenticity, to the layering of different media as a way of presenting the self as the epiphenomenon of assemblages of forces, discourses and technologies. The work of Nancy Pedri has been central here. In her analysis of a number of works, including *Mendel's Daughter* (2006) by Martin Lemelman and *Mallko y papa* (2014) by Argentine illustrator Gusti, Pedri argues that photography is increasingly used in graphic memoirs not only as 'evidence or proof, aide-memoires, or markers of the passage of time' but also in the name of a 'critical engagement with questions of self and its representation' (2017, 7). For Pedri, the inclusion of photographs – whether they be reproduced from familial or public archives, cuttings from newspapers and magazines, or taken by the authors themselves expressly for inclusion in the work – introduces a 'complex layering of perspectives' into graphic memoirs (2017, 20). These multiple perspectives are presented as co-constitutive of the self that is under examination. Through their use of hand-drawn cartoon versions of photographic portraits, Lemelman and Gusti present 'understand[ing] of the self and experience as embodied, shared, relational' (2017, 34). Furthermore, because they are constituted by 'crossing, overlapping, complementary, and competing perspectives', these understandings are 'always in the making' (2017, 20). Although Pedri lists a number of what she terms 'photo-comics' that were produced specifically for online digital platforms, she does not explore the implications of the networked interface on the 'embodied, shared, and relational' experience of selfhood produced through the layering of photographic media and comic book form. Nevertheless, Pedri's work provides a useful critical frame through which to explore the nature of the self and subjectivity that is emerging from the convergence between digital comics and social media.

The centrality of the genre of the selfie to Éff's work is illustrative here, as it foregrounds both the modes of selfhood emerging from the conjunction of social media and digital comics more widely and the role of the comic form in providing a critical frame for the ways in which social media facilitates increasingly complex entanglements between the self and the networks of bodies, images and computational systems that produce it. Recent critics of the selfie have moved away from viewing the genre as evidence of a collective cultural self-obsession or as an indication of the reduction of public discourse to what Zygmunt

Bauman terms 'life politics', in which the subject, stripped of any real political agency and unable to connect his or her experience to that of the wider social field, is reduced to maintaining an illusion of agency through the exercise of market-driven lifestyle choices (2000, 51–2). Aaron Hess, for example, focuses on how selfies illuminate emerging and evolving 'relationships between technology, the self, materiality, and networks' of the digital age (2015, 1630). The 'selfie assemblage', as he terms it, gives expression to 'the affective tensions of networked identity: the longing for authenticity through digitality, the conflicted need for fleeting connection with others, the compulsion to document ourselves in spaces and places, and the relational intimacy found with our devices' (2015, 1631). Selfies both 'announce' these tensions and act as ways of 'coping' with or reconciling them. The tensions identified by Hess provide a useful starting point for examining the role of selfies in Éff's work.

The dominant theme of Éff's Instagram account is a tension between the author's feelings of loneliness and solitude and the cultural imperative to constantly connect with others through online networks. This tension is eloquently captured in a one-page comic posted on 13 June 2018, which narrates the painful process of overcoming a break-up. The first two panels show the author at home gazing down at his mobile phone, while first-person text boxes addressed to his former lover explain that he 'unfollowed' him as soon as they had broken up, but nevertheless continued to check every day to see whether 'se pensava sobre mim [you were thinking about me]'. However, despite this constant albeit clandestine online contact, when the author sees him by the beach the former lovers ignore each other. A possible conservative reading of Éff's critique of social media culture would be that online contact is presented as a replacement for affection in real life. The more that attracting 'likes' and 'follows' online becomes the focus, the less the artist is likely to make any real 'human' contact. There is plenty of evidence to support this reading. There is a tension that runs through Éff's work between frantic activity and movement online and a lack of movement offline. The artist repeatedly presents himself as 'lazy' or overcome by tiredness. The most frequent pose in which Éff depicts himself is lying sprawled in bed, often with his mobile phone gripped in an outstretched hand. And yet, the upkeep of the various platforms and the production of new artwork requires a prodigious amount of activity. Mobility through online networks makes up for a lack of mobility in real life. A two-panel comic posted on 27 June 2017 but with a title 'Mood (2016)', indicating

that it was published the previous year, lampoons this contradiction (see Figure 7.2).



Figure 7.2 Éff confessing his inertia in a comic posted on Instagram on 27 June 2018. © Fernando Caldas (Éff)

The first panel displays a close-up of the artist's head resting against a pillow. Two connected speech bubbles read: 'Aparecendo pouco nas redes sociais / pra criar um mistério sobre o que tenho feito da vida [Appearing infrequently on social media / to create a mystery about what I have been doing with my life]'. The second panel is a zoom-out of the first and reveals that the artist is lying on a worn-out sofa with a bag of crisps. A one-word thought panel states: 'Nada [Nothing]'. The object of satire is the fact that social media is often used to produce the illusion of an active and fulfilling social life, which belies a reality that is more disconnected.

And yet, when taken as a whole, the staging of Éff's work through social media platforms presents a much more complex picture in which

online connection and embodied affective life are inextricably interconnected. A further tension that runs through Éff's work in a less explicit way is between the author's embodied emotional life and the algorithmic systems that govern the ordering, storage and display of information on the sites used as the primary interface with his readers. Firstly, the fragmented sequentiality of the platform Instagram dictates the manner in which the autobiographical narrative reaches its readers. Rather than a linear chronological narrative, Éff's life story is focused on the present and broken down into brief 'hits' of textual-visual information. A post on 15 June 2018 acknowledges the state of the online information ecology in which Éff's work is competing for attention. Three images collated in a slide show contain split screens of a well-known meme on one side and Éff role-playing the meme on the other. The title reads: 'Incluindo cosplay de memes como habilidades extras no meu currículo [Including cosplaying memes as extra skills on my CV]'. The parody strips the memes of their communicational content, drawing attention to both their composition and their intended effect of cutting through the imagistic 'noise' of social media. One is a version of the 'Is this a pigeon?' meme, adapted from the 1990s Japanese anime series *The Brave Fighter of Sun Fighbird*, used on social networks to express total confusion. The original image is a still from the anime showing an android pointing to a butterfly while the subtitle shows him as saying 'Is this a pigeon?'. As the image went viral, the three elements – humanoid, butterfly, subtitle – were adapted to express situations in which something is misunderstood. The parody of the meme draws attention to a parallel with the communicational intent of many of Éff's comic pages, which are intended both as snapshots of the artist's life and as pithy observations on digital existence. The 'appearing infrequently on social media' post, for instance, received a number of comments expressing identification: 'Muito eu isso [That's so me]'.

In a post that appeared on 22 January 2018 Éff openly addresses the fact that, at the level of distribution, he is forced to negotiate the constraints of the platform. The post was composed in reaction to a change to the Instagram algorithms which meant that his 'tirinhas' (comic strips) would not appear automatically on the timelines of his followers. To ensure maximum exposure of his work Éff, appearing in front of a blackboard displaying instructions, encourages his follows to click on the 'Ativar notificações de publicação' option on the drop-down menu of the Settings tab. A long comment from Éff assures his readers that 'não é culpa minha e sim do algoritmo [sic] do instagram que vai

mudar [it's not my fault but that of Instagram's algorithms, which are changing]'. The agency behind the distribution and display of his work – the order and frequency with which it reaches its readers – is divided between the artist, the algorithmic infrastructure of the platform and the social media habits of subscribers. This algorithmic infrastructure affects not only distribution and ordering but also the composition of the images themselves. The drawn photographs that appear frequently in Éff's work draw attention to the algorithmic mediation of the photographic images that are constitutive of networked visual cultures. The layering of the textual-visual nature of the comic form over the networked photographic images that fuel Instagram draws attention to what Daniel Rubinstein and Katrina Sluis (2013) identify as a key paradox of the digital age: namely, the fact that the profusion of images in digital cultures is bound up with a shift away from the visual. The fact that in digital image platforms the close connection between storage and display that was inextricable for analogue photography has been disconnected (stored as 1s and 0s, displayed as pixels) 'suggests that the digital image cannot be fully understood through the premises of indexicality and ocularcentrism as its final appearance is the result of computation rather than the direct agency of light' (Rubinstein and Sluis 2013, 29). In networked cultures, Martin Lister points out, photography has become 'informational': 'Computational software and algorithms that carry out specific tasks and operations are now not only built into cameras but also into the extended apparatus of photography: the online organisations, social media sites, data-bases and post-production "lightrooms" where photographs are made, stored, organized, classified and shared' (Lister 2013, 13).

The 'informational' status of the photographic image is foregrounded in a number of ways by social media. Instagram, the main focus in this analysis, was one of the first platforms to popularise the use of stylistic filters that give the user the ability to create the impression of having used a variety of film stocks. At the time of writing, Instagram enables users to employ an extensive range of filters, including 'face filters' that allow you to add 'virtual koala ears' or 'nerd glasses' to photographic images, and software that enables you to write over images and videos by hand. The addition of hand-written text produced through touch-screen software to photographic images has become a dominant mode of vernacular expression on social media. To use Orbán's phrase, Instagram makes a feature of the manipulable 'drawn' quality of the digital image. In Éff's work, the cartoon versions of networked images,

reproduced in the context of comic-book form, draw attention to their preexisting ‘drawn’ quality. A comic posted on 28 September 2017 merges the visual vernaculars of comic-book culture with selfie filters (see Figure 7.3).



Figure 7.3 A blend of comic-book syntax with selfie filters popular on social media, posted on Instagram on 28 September 2017. © Fernando Caldas (Éff)

The comic is composed of four drawn versions of photographic portraits of the artist, which are overlaid by both the visual techniques that identify the image as a comic (speech bubbles) and typical filters used in Instagram and Snapchat (emojis). The whimsical aesthetic of the four portraits clashes with the content of the speech bubbles in their expression of despair: ‘Que Deus elimine todos nós [May God obliterate us all]’. Again, the satirical aim of the comic is to expose the gap between appearance and reality. This message supports the critical self-reflexive perspective Éff’s digital comics provide on their use of photography. While Éff’s work does foreground a continuity between photographic

image and comic-book form (both being highly mediated), rather than an aesthetic of disjuncture between the two, the result is not to naturalise the algorithmic mediation of networked images. Rather, the comics draw attention to the effects of this mediation on the hybrid vernacular languages that they produce and the modes of connection that they encourage.

The foregrounding of filters draws attention to another aspect of ‘informational’ photography in networked culture: the fact that the metadata produced in the act of photographic capture and distribution – from tagging to recording the time and place of upload – is becoming equally if not more important than the content of the images themselves. As indicated by the post exhorting readers to enable the notification function on their timeline, the success of the comics is measured by how many readers they reach, how many ‘likes’ and comments they generate. In his analysis of what he describes as the ‘rhetoric’ of JPEG software, which is still the most common image software used by social media, Daniel Palmer argues that the practice of tagging, by enabling photographs to be ‘catalogued, searched, shared and used’, has replaced the caption as the dominant mode of textual accompaniment to photographic images (2013, 156). The use of hashtags by Éff – more frequent on his Twitter account than on Instagram, and even then only employed sparingly and ironically – provides searchers with alternate trajectories through points of contact with his work. For instance, a selfie posted across a number of platforms simultaneously on 18 July 2018, showing Éff perfecting his latest carefully cultivated ‘look’, was accompanied by the hashtag #NewProfilePic. If a Twitter user ran a search for this hashtag they would find Éff’s image alongside a range of other selfies and profile photographs, using the hashtag either to mark a new phase in their online existence or as an ironic comment on a portrait (often of a celebrity) that is deemed awkward or inappropriate in some way. Éff’s tagged profile photo – accompanied on Instagram by a long comment on the centrality of performance to both his identity and his work – might then become a point of entry to the work as a whole. The text that appears on the comics themselves can be viewed as an extension of the connective logic of tagging. In the competition with memes in the online attention economy, cartoon versions of the buzzwords of social media culture such as ‘Bloquear’ and ‘Decontinuar’ work as communicational channels that cut through the noise (see [Figure 7.4](#)).



Figure 7.4 Detail of a comic posted on 15 March 2018 exploring the buzzwords of connective digital culture. © Fernando Caldas (Éff)

Followers can immediately see that the comic is attempting, through a particular life experience, to articulate a wider truth about current cultures of connectivity. These drawn buzzwords are also nodes in what Thierry Groensteen describes as the ‘plurivectorial’ paths that readers take back and forth across panels and pages, often against the linear flow of the narrative (2007, 108).

These networks of connections are constitutive of both the mode of selfhood staged in Éff's comics and the dominant vehicle for this selfhood, the 'autographic selfie'. The connection between self and networks evidences one of the tensions described by Hess in his account of selfie assemblages: namely, between a desire for authenticity and meaningful interpersonal connection and an ecstatic embrace of the reduction of life to information and the production of connective metadata. On the one hand, the primacy of connection in his work positions Éff in relation to the dominant modes of what Grant Bollmer terms 'nodal citizenship' in digital cultures. For Bollmer, a 'nodal citizen' is one who 'relates to others by connecting and maintaining flows' of data (2016, 7). The rise of nodality as a measure of citizenship erodes 'the ability to distinguish between human and technology [. . .] producing humans as objects that serve as imagined material relays supposedly interchangeable with infrastructure' (Bollmer 2016, 8). On the other hand, as we have seen, the themes of disconnection, solitude and laziness are central to the narrative of many of the comics. Key to the development of these themes are depictions of the artists' body, whether stood in front of a camera phone at the end of an outstretched arm or positioned in front of a camera on a timer or operated by a friend. One of the repeated claims that Éff makes on behalf of his work is the exposure it subjects him to. The 22 January 2018 post begins by telling readers that 'você sabem como coloco meu coração e minha alma nas coisas que faço [you know how I put my heart and soul into what I do]'. His posed performative selfies alternate with unglamorous insights into his often lonely existence.

The selfies that appear in Éff's work are an attempt to reconcile these two desires caught in tension. Paul Frosh's (2015) description of the selfie as a 'gestural image' is a useful conceptual tool for identifying the specificities of the autographic selfie. Like Hess, Frosh argues that selfies should not be understood purely in visual terms, but rather for the ways in which they integrate photographic images into 'a technological circuit of corporeal social energy' that he terms 'kinesthetic sociability' (Frosh 2015, 1608). A key technological innovation that has enabled the selfie boom is the design of the smartphone. That they can be easily held and operated with the same hand, that they display an image of the 'pre-photographic scene' large enough to be viewed at arm's length, and that they have lenses on both the front and back mean that, unlike traditional cameras, smartphones no longer function as a 'barrier between visible photographed spaces and undepicted locations of photographing and viewing' (ibid., 1611). The two main consequences of this are that 'the space of photographic production or enunciation

is effortlessly unified with the space of the picture itself' and that 'the unified space of production and depiction becomes a field of embodied inhabitation' since the camera is 'literally incorporated' as 'part of a hand-camera assemblage' (ibid., 1612). Selfies mobilise the indexical aura surrounding photography as part of a 'connective performance' between gestural images and their habituated embodied responses (whether tapping the screen in approval or swiping in dismissal) rather than to authenticate 'semantic reference' (ibid., 1609). Éff's selfies are bound up with this 'gestural economy of affection' (ibid., 1622) in that they routinely elicit hundreds of 'likes' from followers and are matched by the countless selfies of friends and followers that the artist 'retweets' in his Twitter account.

The 'technocultural circuits of corporeal social energy' of Éff's selfie networks are echoed by the modes of reading demanded by the comic-book form in two ways. Firstly, the type of engagement demanded by comics, whether print or digital, reflexively draws attention to the embodied dimensions of reading and viewing. As a range of scholars have pointed out, through their multimodal structures, comic books produce a broad range of sensory responses. Karin Kukkonen (2015), for instance, argues that the 'compositional lines' that determine page and panel layouts produce particular embodied responses that intervene into the reader's body schema (the use of the body to orient oneself in space).³ Digital comics, in their various modes, bring with them their own set of habituated body responses. Some of these responses map onto those demanded by print (the compositional lines described by Kukkonen, for example), while others are specific to the interface (whether clicking through to the next page on a desktop computer or swiping on a touchscreen). Secondly, the relational construction of meaning in comic books echoes the relational constitution of selfhood in selfie culture. Just as the construction of meaning in comics is the production of a 'dynamic interaction between panel and page; word and image; book, reader and environment' (King and Page 2017, 12), in selfie networks, as Katie Warfield points out drawing on the agential realist philosophy of Karen Barad, self-portrait photographs posted on social media 'do not involve photos interacting with an a priori self, but rather the boundaries of the self are agentially cut and demarcated within the material-discursive entanglement of body, image, technology, photo, and place' (Warfield 2016, 3). While the formation of any identity is always already the product of a dynamic intra-action between mutually constituting elements rather than an inter-action between a priori entities, selfies, Warfield argues, enable a reflexive perspective on this process and

therefore give selfie-takers a degree of control over it. Focusing on the role of gendered discourses, Warfield argues that selfie production often 'reveals a kind of agency that emerges as the result of small shifts and reconfigurations' of the ideologically dominant apparatuses of bodily production (Warfield 2016, 7). However, the potentially self-reflexive critical role of selfies identified in Warfield's optimistic reading is more often than not occluded by the sheer banality of this mode of image-making. The repositioning of the self within the comic form restores some of this critical potential. Éff's autographic selfies are critical interventions into contemporary selfie culture that perform the role of digital comics in both the formation of and critical reflection on emerging forms of networked techno-cultural sociability.

Éff's conflation of social-media selfie aesthetics with the genre of the graphic memoir draws attention to the networked nature of digital comics, a dimension that is often elided in discussions of the form that focus on definitions and questions of medium specificity. The parallel between the networked construction of meaning within the comics and the networked nature of the techno-cultural ecology in which they are constructed and circulate does not serve to simply naturalise the latter. Rather, the points of contact between the two open up a space for a critique of emerging modes of digitally mediated sociality. The specific form of the autographic selfie mobilised by Éff draws attention to the imbrication of networked photography in regimes of power. As Jill Rettberg argues in her discussion of female teen selfies and the public censure they often receive, '[t]his is about power and about who has the right to speak in public or share images in public' (2014, 17). By framing his selfies within a comic-book aesthetic Éff's work draws attention to their role in negotiating dominant regimes of representation, to the connection between the individual and techno-cultural assemblages of social media culture, as well as to the limits of the dominant doxa of connectivity. Furthermore, the networked digital comics analysed in this chapter provide an insight into the overlaps between comic-book form and the vernacular visualities of social media culture, from the combination of text and image to the merging of drawn and photographic imagery, in a way that draws attention to possibilities of multimodal expression that undergird these emerging practices of digital sociality.

Emerging research is pointing to the ways in which the increasing mediation of social life by online platforms in Brazil is not reducible simply to increased individualisation and atomisation. In his ethnographic study of social media usage in low-income informal settlements in Brazil, which have grown in number and density during the crisis despite

being the object of mounting state repression, Julianio Spyer argues that digital platforms that use predominantly visual forms of communication (photographs and memes) enable communities to ‘retain the type of dense social relations that migration and new modalities of work are diluting’ (Spyer 2017, 1). Rather than another force of modernisation that is fragmenting communities, Spyer argues, in practice social media platforms are being used to reconstruct ‘dense’ forms of sociality. An analysis of digital comics in Brazil contributes to this picture of how social media is rapidly changing practices and conceptions of how individuals connect with one another. Rather than merely naturalising neoliberal dreams of connectivity and its dominant modes of ‘nodal citizenship’ or reflecting a return to ‘traditional’ modes of ‘dense’ sociality, the encounter between digital comics and social media creates a space of self-reflexive negotiation between the two.

Notes

- 1 For an overview of debates surrounding the ‘truth claims’ made for photographic image technologies, see Gunning (2008).
- 2 For similar approaches to the issue of post-conflict memory using combinations of photography and the comic-book form, see *Rupay: Historias de la violencia política en Perú, 1980–1984*, a dramatisation of the *Informe Final* (Final Report) published by the Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación (Truth and Reconciliation Commission) in 2003. For a discussion of this and other related works in Peru, see Milton (2017).
- 3 For a fuller discussion of the ‘haptic turn’ in comics scholarship, see King and Page (2017, 8–9).

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